

For Every Season

by duskwatcher2153

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Summary: Can a Great Love ever truly end? When Claire's worst fears are realized, can she face the sunset of their lives with grace?

"Though lovers be lost love shall not; And death shall have no dominion."

1. Chapter 1

"How is he doing?" Bree's eyes were wide and serious.

I rubbed the back of my hand across my forehead, wiping away the beads of sweat gathered at my hairline. Spring had finally arrived on the ridge, and its first warm day was glorious. The heat of the house rose to the second floor where our bedroom was, and by mid-afternoon, it was warm. I shook out the coverlet and let it billow to rest on the bed. "Bloody Scot," I grumbled over my shoulder as I tucked in the corners. "He knows I want him to get well, so of course he's too stubborn to do so."

Bree's lips pressed together, as if to say something but instead she picked up the empty pitcher on the bedside table. "I'll get some more water," she volunteered.

"Thank you, dear," I said, coming around to the other side of the bed. Jamie was thirsty all the time, now. His urine was strong and sweet-smelling and it was worrying me. It meant his kidneys could be failing, the latest in a line of symptoms- all of which boded no good. I went over it in my mind- the diabetes-like symptoms, the swollen gallbladder, the abdominal pain. Even the slight case of jaundice, which explained why I'd had Roger and Jeb carry him outside to where the fall sunshine might work on him.

I wouldn't say it, not even in my own mind, but the physician inside me ruthlessly went over the symptoms. Increased thirst, loss of weight even before he'd lost his appetite, the nausea and pain I knew he felt but refused to complain about in front of anyone but me. The mass in his abdomen, the jaundice. The symptoms were cascading. If I knew for sure, I'd chance a biopsy; I still had a bit of ether in my

surgeryâ€|

"Mom?" Bree was still standing in the room, clutching the water pitcher to herself, her arms squeezing it against her belly. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears and her chin quivered once before she grit her teeth to stop it. She fought for control and I saw her take a deep breath before she raised her chin. "Is Da going to be all right?"

For a moment, the habit to reassure her, to pretend that it was all within my power to fix, to be the powerful _La Dame Blanche_ who could save men with a wave of her hand or the herbs in her chest, tempted me. I'd saved dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of lives with my knowledge and skill. But this time, there was no magic cure in my hands. This was not an illness that I could fight, I spent my days making sure Jamie was comfortable, tucking in the blanket around his perpetually cold feet, trying to persuade him to have a bit more broth when his stomach was settled, having Roger and Jeb move him outside when the weather permitted, and my nights in the small medical library I had amassed over the years, looking for anything that might indicate a different diagnosis than the one all the signs pointed to. The thought of it lay in the bottom of my mind like a sleeping snake. _Pancreatic Cancer._

I spun away from the bed, trying to shake the words from me. I had not the presence of mind to compose my face before I turned in her direction and I saw the terror I knew was written on my countenance reflected in her eyes. Her eyes, so like his, widened and her chest rose in a silent gasp.

I stood before her, suddenly speechless. I could not speak the words of reassurance, for I knew in my heart they were not true. I swallowed once as a pain originated in my heart, radiated outward and I made a small helpless gesture with a hand.

The crockery in her hands fell to the floor, and shattered on the edge of the hearth, spraying pieces outward. The sharp slivers would cut the soles of the feet of Jenny Marie and Billy, Bree's youngest, when they came to visit their grandfather in bed. "Oh, " I gasped, dazed. I fell to my knees, gathering the pieces in the apron I wore. "The pitcherâ€|" It was just a plain white pitcher, slightly misshapen at that, but suddenly it seemed a tragedy that it was gone, broken, shattered. "The pieces..." I said, tears springing to my eyes and thickening in my throat. As my hand reached for another jagged piece, her hand stopped mine. She knelt beside me, and threw an arm around my shoulders.

"Oh, damn it, Mother." Her voice shook with tears. "Fuck the pitcher." Her eyes were brimming with tears and suddenly I could not be the strong one. She pulled me into her arms, where the fear and the pain and the specter of loss rolled over me like a wave, drowning me, pulling me into its darkness. We clung tightly to each other, holding on as if we were shipwrecked sailors , adrift in an ocean of grief. We knelt together among the pieces of shattered crockery and wept.

They were long, shuddering sobs, pulled wrenchingly from me and echoing from the depths of my love for the Highlander that had given my life shape and meaning. She cried with me, with the knowledge that this second father whom she had come to love was to be taken from

her.

"I can't stand it, Bree," I whimpered into her hair, when the ability to speak returned to me. "I can take anything but losing him."

She had her arms wrapped around my neck and I felt her hands cup my head and smooth my hair. "I know, Mom, I know." She pulled back from me, tear tracks shimmering on her cheeks, her nose red and blotchy. Her face searched mine. "Does he know?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "No, I haven't said anything to him. I think he knows I'm scared, but I keep hoping my diagnosis is wrong."

The sound of footsteps climbing the stairs drifted into the room, as well as the sound of Mrs. Mueller's huffing. Our housekeeper for the last few years, she was a rotund German woman. "Halloo," she called as she came down the hall. "Ist everyone all right in here?"

"Yes, we're fine," I answered, using the corner of my apron to wipe my eyes. "Just a small accident." Bree dragged the sleeve of her dress across her face as I started reaching to gather the crockery shards again.

I stood up, holding my apron, the pitcher's pieces clanking together inside its folds. Still on her knees, Bree looked up at me and I could see the many questions she wanted to ask in her eyes.

"Later," I promised softly. "Later." At the moment, I had to pull myself together.

Mrs. Mueller turned the corner into the room and clucked at the crockery pieces still strewn around the room. "Ach, is de broom we'll be needing."

* * *

><p>The floor swept, and Bree and Mrs. Mueller off to find another pitcher, I lingered in our bedroom. I gave the window sill a sharp rap and then pushed on the window. After a long winter hiatus, it gave begrudgingly but it finally swung open and the warm spring air, redolent of grass and trees, gently wafted in. I inhaled deeply, the fresh breezes nearly paradisaical after the smoky, close air of the winter. I fingered the curtains, they could use a good washing next laundry day.<p>

Our window overlooked the front of the house and out on the patch of grass in front of the house, Roger and Jem had set up one of the deep chairs from the living room. Jamie sat in it, his face upturned to the sun, a patchwork quilt over his shoulders and across his lap. His hair had finally given up its ginger, and had warmed to a pale yellow color except where it shone a pure silver at the temples.

His eyes were closed against the strength of the sun, his face serene and at rest. Even with the pallor of winter and the tinge of his illness, his skin was ruddy, speaking of a life lived outdoors. The lines of his face were deep and strongly etched: lines of care that ridged his forehead, the crow's feet at his eyes' corners and the brackets around his mouth that revealed a readiness to laugh. Age had sharpened his nose even more, but those eyes were still the same,

the same startling blue surrounded by his rufous lashes.

Around the corner of the house, Alexander the goat came trotting at a sharp pace, a brown flash of cloth dangling from his mouth. He was followed in quick succession by Jem, and the dangling brown object resolved into Jem's hat. Jem, now a tall and gangly boy of nineteen, had taken to wearing a slouch hat, much in the manner of the Carolina regiment that had passed through last fall, much to Bree's chagrin. She had absolutely refused to consider the possibility of Jem joining up with them, despite his fervent arguments for just such an endeavor. Watching Jem's long strides, and athletic pursuit of Alexander, I thought it wouldn't be too much longer before Bree was no longer granted the consideration.

"Gimme back my hat, ye quim-licking scunner!" Jem cried, snatching for the hat, causing Alexander to veer sharply toward Jamie's chair. Jamie's arm shot out as the goat cantered past, plucking the hat from the surprised goat, who then turned and wheeled back to the safety of the goats' enclosure.

"Here ye be, lad," Jamie said, offering the hat.

"Thanks, Grandda." Jem jammed the hat on, a bit worse for wear. Even from my perch, I could see a tear and missing bit of the brim. Jem squatted next to the chair, so Jaime would not have to squint up into the sun to see him.

"Best ye not let your Ma and Da hear you speak like that," Jamie warned. "You may be too old for a tanning but I'll wager they'll think of something unpleasant."

Jem peered from under the misshapen hat brim. "Well, let's not tell them, then, eh?"

Jamie snorted with humor. "They'll not hear it from me," he promised.

Jem picked up a twig and scratched a line in the dirt with it. "So, what appears to be ailing ye?"

Jamie glanced up to the window where I was concealed by the curtain. I took a silent step backward, but kept my eyes on the tableau below. He shrugged. "Oh, it's just all going to pot, ye ken?" Even that small bit was an admission I'd not heard him make before. He'd tell me of his aches and pains if he were asked, but stoicism came naturally to him and admitting to frailty in front of Jem was startling.

"Doesna Grannie have something to cure ye?"

"I think mebbe not this time," Jamie said. He leaned toward the boy. "And aye, it's making her verra crabbit."

"You're sick and _she's _crabbit?' Jem asked, puzzled.

"Indeed. The sicker I get, the more crabbit she gets. She takes it personally, you ken, when I refuse to get better."

Jem tossed the twig in his hands away. "Well, you'd best get better soon, aye?"

Jamie smiled at the squatting boy. "So, who was it you were in such a hurry to see last night?" _Last night?_ I wondered. Roger and Bree had not said anything about visitors last night.

"Oh, ye saw that, eh?" Jem said, the color rising on his checks.

Jamie nodded. "Take the time to oil the hinges on the surgery door before you try to slip away next time. It creaks something fierce." I didn't remember hearing the surgery door, but I knew Jaime had had another restless night.

Jem pulled the hat off his head and looked up at his grandfather through the hair that had fallen over his eyes. It had deepened to the same shade of Bree's and Jamie's at that age- a brilliant mix of cinnamon, amber and flame. "Hank and Willie Dunham were going coon hunting. They'd asked me to come along."

"Hmmpm," his grandfather said, infusing the noise with a fair amount of skepticism. "And that hunting wouldna be anywhere near the McElviray property, would it?" The McElvirays had a full brace of daughters, three of them between twenty and sixteen. They all had their mother's amply rounded figure and large, thickly-lashed eyes.

Jem grinned, abashedly. "Well, there _are_ a muckle lot of them over that way." Jem's brogue broadened when speaking to his grandfather. He had Jamie's gift for languages and could easily slip into Gaelic.

Jamie's brow furrowed. "You're lucky Angus McElviray didna shoot ye where ye stood."

"Aye, he tried," Jem confessed. "Willie near got a pantload of buckshot. As it was, he dropped from the tree he was in so quick, he turned his ankle fierce and Hank and I had to nearly carry him home."

Jamie chuckled. "Well, then ye got away light. Angus is no known for being tolerant when it comes to his daughters."

"That's God's truth," Jem said, scratching his head. Across the yard, Alexander was getting dangerously close to the bandages I had spread on the blackberry bushes to let the sunshine disinfect. I took a step forward, thinking to alert Jem below, but Jamie was already on it.

"Best get that goat in the pen," he said, nodding to where Alexander was eyeing my linens.

Jem rose and jammed the hat back on his head. "I could learn to hate goats," he muttered as he turned away. Jamie chuckled again and he twisted in his chair toward the window where I stood. His eyes found me unerringly. A knowing smile crossed his face, and I knew he'd been aware of me the whole time.

His eyes turned to Jem as he manhandled the goat back to the pen and I could see pride swell his chest. This family, Roger and Bree and their children, was Jamie's proudest legacy and he felt that because

of them, he had not lived his life in vain.

* * *

><p>For my co-Outlander fans. More to come. If you are enjoying, please let me know<p>

2. Chapter 2

It was bread-making day- the whole house smelled of baking yeast. Twice a week Mrs. Mueller mixed huge bowls of dough to rise in the warmth of the kitchen. We had two brick-lined bread ovens built into the kitchen hearth and they would produce the bread and rolls needed for not only our household but Bree's as well. I'd spent the afternoon in the surgery tending the penicillin colonies, distilling and purifying. Jamie had been set up in his sitting room, the door was open and Roger was in there with him.

I stood outside the door, gathering my strength before putting on my doctorly face and getting Jamie back upstairs. Sleep had been eluding me this week, and a part of me seemed to be actively fighting it. I would snuggle up against Jamie at night, wrapped in the warmth and security of his arms until I heard his breath deepen and regulate as he fell into sleep. My own mind would be going a million miles an hour, so I would turn and watch him sleep by the moonlight. I wanted to spend hours memorizing and cherishing each line, each hair on his head. His face would soften and smooth with the relaxation of sleep until he looked like the young man I had married. His arms and shoulders above the sheet were those of an older man, though, covered with the scars of battles fought and won.

I had loved him passionately in my youth, mourned his loss and then celebrated when we were reunited. We had years since filled with joy and adventure, loss and love but I knew, with a sureness that brooked no controversy, that I loved him more deeply, more completely now in our old age than I could have ever imagined when we were younger. There were no limits to it- it was that which amazed me. Whenever I thought I could not love him more, that this was as complete a love as there could be, another day would dawn and I would know that my feelings were even deeper, more passionate, more central to my world than the day before. He was my universe, and it did not matter where or when we were, just that we were.

There were, however, limits to how far his stamina would stretch. His voice was still strong , but I knew that by this time in the afternoon, he would be starting to feel fatigued. He sniffed once and cleared his throat. "Ye'll need to keep an eye on Silas Whitney, aye? His mother's no match for him. She needs a man to ride herd on that crop of hellions."

Roger 's chair creaked as he shifted his weight. "Aye, its been a hard road for her since Gordie died."

Jamie made a Scottish sound of dismissal. "He wasna all that much of a help when he was alive." The two of them chuckled softly. "Perhaps ye could be introducing Tommy Buchanan to her at the Gathering."

Roger made a low noise in his throat that conceded that possibility.

I paused while I puzzled why Jamie was talking about the fall celebration now.

"The north meadow, up by the white spring," Jamie said. "It's been fallow for two years and ye can plant barley there next spring."

"Oats in the middle field, yer thinking?"

"Aye, and the corn in the low one. But ye mun wait to seed until after the full Milk Moon."

"We manured the Higgins' field today, and we'll be starting with MacIntosh's tomorrow."

"Good. Ye'll be needing to geld Betty's colt come summer. Oh, and dinna ferget to fix that fence in the west field before ye turn the mules out. Jem said he heard a painter in the woods near there last week."

That damn Scot! He was giving instructions as if he wasn't going to be around. He'd only be handing out future plans if he thought he wasn't going to be here to oversee them. Anger made my hands clench. Did he trust in my abilities so little then? I certainly wasn't giving up on him, and he'd better damn well not be giving up on me. We would find something that might help him, there were still avenues to be explored. God, how many times had I brought him back from the brink? It could still — No! It would happen again.

It was a physician's attitude, there is always something more that can be done, maybe some out-of-the-way treatment or medicine that can improve a patient just as long as they hold on. I'd heard a story when I'd worked in Boston from a patient who'd worked in the NTSB, doing the investigations on domestic plane crashes. He'd said that was one thing that was the same in every black box tape they'd listened to— the pilots were always working right up to the very last second, trying the elevons, the rudder, trying to get the nose up, any odd thing that might possibly help. "Up until that very last moment," he said, "when they realize they're out of time, only then it's the final 'oh shit', right before they smack into mountainside or the water. Up until then, you can hear them always trying to find something, some way, to pull their nuts out of the fire."

Well, as far as I was concerned, we weren't anywhere near that 'oh shit' moment and I'd be damned if anyone's nuts were getting singed. I swept into the study.

Jamie sat in the leather chair behind his desk, his books open on the desk in front of him, massaging his maimed hand. His untouched lunch balanced on the corner on the desk. At nearly seventy, he was still straight and firm, his shoulders square under the wool shawl thrown over them. His color was good today, the warmer weather was agreeing with him. His blue eyes burned with intelligence and humor, and his eyebrow twitched as he saw me. He registered my mood in an instant, and nodded to Roger. "We'll talk again tomorrow."

Roger rose from his chair facing the desk and stretched toward the ceiling. He nodded to me. "Bree says to thank ye for the motherwort. It's helping her quite a bit."

"Good, I'm glad," I said, keeping my gaze on Jamie. He was eyeing me speculatively.

"Well, then," Roger said, in the somewhat tense silence that followed. "Til tomorrow, then."

"Aye, til tomorrow," Jamie said.

Roger padded out, and Jamie leaned back in his chair. His mouth twitched once as he regarded me. "Ye've got something to say, Sassanach?"

I put my hands on the desk and leaned forward over it. "You bet I do. Sounds like you're handing out instructions."

His eyes dropped and he brushed some imaginary dust off the book in front of him as I straightened up and crossed my arms to await his answer. "Well, ye ken, that's kinda what I do here. I'm a wee bit too old for wrestling a plow behind a mule, don't ya think? If that's what you're â€"

"Don't you play the fool with me, James Fraser. You're , you're â€" " I searched for the word that would convey my anger and frustration, my hands clenched at my sides. "You're surrendering, aren't you? Do you think so little of my healing abilities that you're just going to lay down and die?" My voice nearly broke on the last word, but I swallowed my tears and dug my fingernails into my palms.

His level gaze met mine, and his eyes softened. "_Mo chridhe, mo nighean donn._ Did ye think I dunno know?"

I raised my chin. "Know what?" I was proud my voice didn't even tremble.

He raised his strong, large and weathered hands in front of him. His maimed right hand had adapted to the loss of his ring finger and for most strangers, it took a second glance to realize that a finger was missing. He stretched his hands out and turned them over and again, examining them. "I ha' lived in this body for nigh seven decades now. It's been beaten and abused most grievously o'er the years and yet it always answered me when I needed it." His voice dropped. "I ken what it's telling me now."

"And what is that?" I demanded.

"And then it's what you're not telling me, too, Sassenach. I see the fear that lies behind your eyes." My vision blurred, but I heard him rise and come around the desk behind me. "If there was something that could be done, ye'd be planning and carrying on. But ye don't and ye haven't. " He drew me back against the warmth of his chest, wrapping his arms around me. "Ye havena told me at all, and that ha' been more telling than anything ye might say."

"I'm wrong, I could be wrong," I whispered. My face was burning with the need to cry.

He made a Scottish noise in his throat that was full of humor. "Now I know I must be standing at death's door to hear those words on your lips."

I turned around swiftly and stepped away from his embrace. Anger made me shake. "Don't you dare, James Alexander Malcolm McKenzie Fraser, you bloody fucking Scot! Don't you dare! " I was so furious I couldn't even find the words.

His eyebrow rose. "Aye?"

His eyes searched mine and I saw there that he knew why I was angry. That it was my own helplessness that was driving this fury. That and fear. No, not fear. Terror. It ate the anger and left me there, shaking, speechless, while my heart dropped to my feet.

"Oh, Jamie!" I cried and threw my arms around his neck. The tears started in earnest. I had been holding onto them for so long, trying to stay positive and supportive. My feelings of helplessness overwhelmed me and I began to sob loudly. I was facing an unimaginable loss and it felt as if my heart was being pulled from my chest. I hugged him as tight as I could, as if holding him would keep him safe and with me.

He maneuvered us over to the settee and pulled me onto his lap. He held me tight against his chest while I curled against him like a child. He smoothed my hair and crooned soft soothing words of Gaelic that I couldn't even understand and didn't try, listening instead to the love and reassurance behind those words.

As the wave of emotion subsided , the words began to make sense. He was whispering in Gaelic, again and again. "Tha mi duilich. Tha mi cho duilich . Tha mi duilich a 'fÃ gail thu cÃ¹l."

I pulled back, sniffing. "You're sorry? What are _you_ sorry for?"

His thumb smudged a tear across my cheek. "That I must leave you. I know I promised the protection of my body. It seems the time is coming where I must break my word."

"No, no. I won't let you go." I shook my head. I started to slide off his lap. There had to be something. Perhaps if I travelled to Boston, to the medical libraries there -

His arms tightened around me. "Oh, _mo chridhe,_ my heart. I have loved the fight in ye since I first laid eyes on ye. " He pulled back to look me in the eyes. "But, Claire, this is not a fight ye can win."

"There must be some medicines we can try â€"

His hands tightened on my arm. He swallowed once and looked away for a moment before his gaze returned to mine. "No, Claire. No."

I put my hand on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart against my hand. It was the beat that defined my life. "Jamie â€" I pleaded. "Maybe we can..." But I trailed off. There wasn't anything in my surgery that would make a difference. Make him more comfortable perhaps.

"Let me ask ye, and ye mun tell me true, Sassanach. How long?" He had on his poker face.

"I â€" I can't say for certain, but I suspect not very long at all," I whispered.

"Aye." He nodded, as if that was the answer he expected. "Well, that's good, then."

I laughed through my tears. "Good? That's good?"

His eyes dropped to the floor. "Well, I am a bit of a coward, ye ken? I've no wish to be hanging on in pain for years and years." I took a breath to protest that I would use whatever laudanum I had on hand to make sure that didn't happen but he put a finger on my lips. "Aye, I know ye'd do whatever there was to help me, but I ha' lived too long as a free man to spend the end of my life bound to a bed."

I dragged a hand across my eyes. "How can you talk that way?"

"It's a coward I am, and well I know it. You think it's no easier for me to go first? I ken well-" He swallowed and when he looked at me again, the tears that had been brimming in his eyes started down his face. "If it twere the other way around, do ye think I could stand it?" he whispered. "I must ask ye to do something I could never do and that is to let me go."

"Jamie," I sobbed. I clutched him hard. "I can't. I can't-"

"Ye must, Claire. There's Bree, and Roger. They'll be needing your savvy, eh? And Jem, Mandy, Jenny Marie and Billy. And what of Ian's brood as well? They'll all have need of ye for many years to come."

"No, no." I shook my head, crying. "You can't ask me-"

His hands tightened. "Claire. Claire! Promise me!" I raised my tear stained face to him. "For the bairns' sake, you'll do â€" you'll notâ€| hasten anything along."

I sniffed violently. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to me. I took advantage of it and blew my nose. The amount of liquid the human nose and eyes could produce was really astounding. "You can't tell me what to do when you're gone, " I grumbled, wiping my eyes.

He grinned. "Aye, I ne'er could even while I'm here."

I handed him the wet and crumpled handkerchief; he blew his nose and dropped it beside him. I settled back against him, circled within his arms, my legs across his lap.

"They'll have need of ye," he repeated under his breath as I soaked up his warmth. I wasn't so sure of that.

"It's not fair," I said. "It's just not fair."

"Dinna fash, Sassanach," he said resting his chin on the top of my head. "I ha' had so many years with ye, years that I never thought to hope for. Do you know what it means to me to have had that? To look out over the Ridge and see the family and the community we have built here? Do ye think I ever had the hope of that while I lay in the cave or at Ardsmuir? Oh, dinna fash, _mo nighean donn_, It's grateful I am

for every moment. "

We sat in silence. Every breath he took was precious to me, because now they could be counted. I leaned against him, wrung out by the emotion and just comforted by his heat and nearness.

After a few moments he spoke. "Do ye know?" he asked, wondering. "She was right, I think she was right."

I frowned, trying to think what he could be referring to.
"Hmm?"

"The fortune teller, she said I was like a cat. Nine lives, I would have. By Christ, I think she was right."

He was referring to a fortune teller he'd met during his youth in France during his mercenary years. We had had this conversation before. It had been hard to count - yes, he'd been close to death many times, but what counted as a new life or just a near miss?
"Well, there was the wound you took at Culloden, and then after Wentworth."

"Aye, when Laoghaire shot me. And the snake bite."

"Right." I shuddered at the memory. "Dougal almost got you. That would be five."

He nodded. "Maybe we should count the near miss at the Battle of Monmouth -"

I sat up. "What near miss?"

"Well, when we charged by the church. A British soldier stepped ou' in front of me. He pulled his trigger aimed dead at me, but the gun mis-fired and knocked him down instead o' me."

"What?! You never told me this!"

"You were shot by then. I didna think you'd be wanting to hear about my own misadventures at the moment. "

"Hmmpm." I settled back against him. "There was the ship sinking."

"Ye mean the Euterpe? But I wasna anywhere near that."

"I thought you were dead for weeks, James Fraser. It was all too real for me."

"Hmmpm," he said, conceding the point. "And the yellow fever at Wilmington. That makes eight. This is my ninth life, then."

I reached up and stroked his face. "A hundred lives would not be enough to spend with you."

He clasped my hand in his own and kissed my fingertips. "_Then let amorous kisses dwell_, " he recited softly. "_On our lips begin and tell â€"_"

We finished the stanza together. "_A thousand and a hundred score, A

hundred and a thousand more_ ."

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><p>Fanfiction writers get paid only in reviews...<p>

3. Chapter 3

Rarely is the progression of a terminal disease a straight line. There are good days and bad days and you hold onto hope that the former outweigh the latter. There were days when Jamie couldn't eat, had to struggle to get out of bed, when the great engine that was his body failed what the spirit asked of it. But there were other days, too, when he sprang from our bed in the morning, and was out before the sun had finished rising to see what could be done in keeping the homestead up and running.

There are some men to whom responsibility for others is a burden, and whether they bear it willingly or unwillingly, still they feel its weight. But there are men also, and some women as well, who rise to the needs and demands of others, like a trout to a fly. The care of a community is as complex and involved as the care of a body, but it was something Jamie relished. There were times when I wished I could tell him to slow down and enjoy this time, but seeing to the well-being and prosperity of his tenants was what he enjoyed.

I responded to the needs of the ailing and broken, and I often gained their appreciation if not their confidence. The confidence of his tenants in his judgment, his vision, was what fed his soul. He knew each family as well as his own hand: the children, who was expecting another, how they were related to each other, like a great spider web in connectedness, how he kept in straight in his head, I couldn't say, but he did.

I had just stitched up the foot of Agnes Buchanan who'd lost control of an axe while chopping wood. It was amazing how many axe injuries there were, chopping wood seemed to be current equivalent of what traffic accidents would be in the future. I cleaned, stitched and wrapped the foot and sent her off with strict instructions on keeping it clean. I even had hopes they might be obeyed- Agnes was a doughty woman who ran her house with 3 sons with an iron hand.

I straightened up after the procedure and went to make a record of it in my medical journal. Out of nibs, I slid into Jamie's empty study to get another from his desk. My eyes landed on the hour candle, set on a simple piece of crockery on the mantel. It still had within it the "insurance policy" of the black adamant gem. Jamie had always insisted we set it aside if ever one of us should need to travel back to the 20th century. We had never used it- with Bree and her family here, there was no need to be other than where we were. I had long ago made peace with the lack of hot water on tap and central heating, but I still occasionally remembered autoclaves and ophthalmoscopes with a certain amount of desire. If the 18th century didn't have the conveniences of the 20th, it had Jamie and that was all that was needed to decide my mind.

It did have one thing I could use right now and that was chemotherapy. I had no way to replicate the intricate processes used to create the compounds needed that were the only effective

ingredient for what every sense told me was the pancreatic cancer that was eating away at Jamie's vitality.

But as I stared at the candle, an idea began to blossom. If I could get back to the twentieth century, perhaps I could obtain the chemical compounds. There was no guarantee that I could lay hands on the right ones, cancer therapy could be very individualistic and what worked for one patient might not work for another. I'd have to bring a whole pharmacopeia back with me. My physician's license had most certainly expired; I wouldn't have the access to what was needed. Then there were often so many side effects and they would need treatment as well. How would I know which ones to bring? I couldn't be going back and forth between the stones like a revolving door. For one, the gems needed to guarantee safe passage were not exactly laying around like autumn leaves. For the other, I knew how dangerous those stones were. There were many cases we'd heard of where some intrepid soul did not make the journey through the time barrier intact. There were the sounds in the loathsome place between the ages, too, a cacophony of human and inhuman shrieks and cries that tore the universe in there apart - I shuddered.

We had met some time travelers outside of our family-Geillis Duncan, Donner, Ottertooth. One thing they all had in common was they all made it through the stones with what they carried on them intact. Their clothes, their shoes, whatever they held in their hands or jackets pockets all came through as a whole with them. It was if whatever they touched was made part and parcel of the of the time traveler and was thrust through time with them.

What if I could take Jamie to the future with me? What if we held each other as we went through? He could not hear the stones as could I, Roger and Bree and their children, but goodness, my clothes didn't hear the stones and they made it through intact. Perhaps I could act as guide for him and bring him through with me. One of the old Scottish folk songs that Roger used to sing even told the tale of a woman who had travelled through the stones carrying her baby.

If I could bring Jamie to the twentieth century, we could save him. At the very least, it was a fighting chance! God knows, in the twenty \hat{e} five years since I had been through, there must have been an explosion in cancer research. Perhaps they had something that could save him. Who knows what steps modern medicine had taken in the intervening years?

Something akin to hope began to rise in my chest. This just might be possible. Despair dropped from me like a shed chrysalis. The sudden surcease of expected doom was so refreshing, I felt like I could actually breathe for the first time in months. I sat down at Jamie's desk and immediately started a list of what we would need to realize such a plan. There were the gems of course, for protection through the time passage, better carry extra for Jamie's protection. I'd need clothes that weren't too archaic looking. I would need a good amount of cash - the drug treatments Jamie would need were likely exorbitantly expensive. Alas, health insurance was not an eighteenth century invention and I'm quite sure no policy would cover this particular set of circumstances.

Where would I get such the money needed for such an objective? The answer came right to mind. The gold. The gold in the Spaniard's cave. Arch and Murdina Bug had stolen it from Jamie's aunt, and we had

taken it back after our first big house had burnt down. Jamie had then cached it away in a cave in the mountains, only he and Jem knew exactly where it was. It was perfect. It would travel well, be concentrated enough that we could carry a good amount on our persons and could easily be converted to cash in the twentieth century-much easier than in the current time.

We would need a good amount to start, but if we ran short, we would find what we hadn't taken in the cave in the 20th century! It would be like having our own private bank.

For the first time in weeks, the rock of pain that had lodged in my chest began to ease. I did not do well in situations that require me to watch helplessly. Having a plan, even if it was unlikely and could possibly prove impossible was a relief, a respite from the feelings of inadequacy and helplessness that had been crushing me.

The Spaniard's cave where the stash of gold was hidden was several days away, and besides Jamie, there was only one person who knew the location. I stuffed the paper I had written on in a pocket and went to find Jem.

I found him that afternoon as the shadows grew long. He had spent the day in the woods gathering the maple buckets that collected the sap that ran in the trees, the end of the sugaring season being here. The sap could be boiled down to make maple syrup and maple candies, which the children loved. Kel Johanneson had a sugar house over near the east end that he tended in the spring, and he boiled down the sap into the sweetness.

I saw Jem pass by with Garvey the mule on the way back to the stable. The mule's pack was piled high with the empty buckets and spigots, most of which would be put away until next spring. I caught up with him in the stable. He was climbing down from the loft where they would stash the buckets until next spring, barring any substantial need for them in the meantime.

There were several cans of finished syrup that I took from Garvey's pack and set them aside to bring to the springhouse. The mule huffed with relief as I untied his cinches, munching on the wisps of hay he could reach in the vicinity of where he was tied. "How is Kel?" I asked as I worked the rest of the pack's buckles.

"Fine, he says he's found a bride." Jem lifted the heavy pack harness off of Garvey and separated the pieces.

"A bride? Really? Did he say who?"

"She's not from around here. She's coming on a ship from Sweden, he says she dunna speak a word of English."

Kel was a second generation Swede, but his mother lived with him and I wouldn't be surprised if she was the force behind the sudden nuptials. I leaned over Garvey's back to ask, "Has he ever even met her?"

"No. He's just hoping she's not too much like his mother."

"I'll bet he does." I patted Garvey on the neck. "Well, that will make for an interesting honeymoon."

Jem turned away and grabbed a hoof pick, but not before I saw his ears and neck had turned pink. "Hmmpm."

I came around Garvey and watched as Jem slid his hand down the mule's leg and eased the hoof up. With a few swipes of the pick, he cleaned it of the mud and stones and moved to the hind leg.

"Jem, I have something I need you to do. And I need you to do it quickly and without telling anyone."

He turned around and studied me. At nineteen, he was tall and lean, all hands and feet. His brilliant red hair stuck out from the edges of his hat like a furry fringe. "Well now, tha' sounds guy mysterious." He patted the mule on the rump and went around to start on the hooves on the other side.

I took a deep breath. "I need you to go to the Spaniard's cave."

He popped up from the other side of Garvey. "The cave?"

"Yes, I need some of the gold."

His eyes narrowed. "Do I get to ask what for?"

"I need to buy some gems. I want to take your grandfather through the stones."

His eyebrows rose as he thought that over. He rested an elbow on the mule's back. "You want to go back to â€" His hand made a gesture.

I nodded. "They have drugs there that could help him."

His face blanched just a shade, no doubt remembering his own trips through that dangerous passage. Then his brow furrowed. "I thought he couldn't hear them."

"I think," I said, coming around Garvey, "that he might be able to travel with me, if we keep in close physical contact."

"Closeâ€|" He repeated, thinking. He lifted his hat, revealing how it had pressed his hair close to the skull, except for the wild fringe that escaped around the edges. He ran the other hand over his hair and then jammed the hat back on his head. "Aye, I'll do it."

* * *

><p>Thank you all for your reviews-they are so much appreciated!<p>

End
file.